COMMUNICATING EVALUATION RESULTS

Tips for conducting program evaluation

Once you have analyzed your data, you should share this information with your identified stakeholders. Effective communication strategies help stakeholders understand the results and use the information to improve programming and guide policy enhancements.

Select the right communications strategy

Once you have obtained your evaluation results, you should share the findings with your key audiences. You may have several intended audiences, each with different interests and preferences regarding the report. For example, an evaluation designed to help staff improve programming may lead to a report that is very different from one required by an external funding source or one designed to share "lessons learned" with a broader professional community.

Before writing your report, consider your audience and what you are trying to communicate. Content is not always best shared in a long and complicated report. Three concise pages may have more impact than a fifty page report. Instead of a large document describing a complex set of ideas, consider dividing results into several smaller reports. In determining your approach, consider what will be the easiest and clearest way to present the information to your key stakeholders.

While many evaluations result in a detailed report, this approach is not always necessary or appropriate. Verbal presentations with supporting charts, case studies or targeted qualitative results may meet your needs. However, many evaluations will call for a report summarizing the goals and history of the program, methods of evaluation, findings, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations.

Decide what to include in your report

No one approach fits all written evaluation reports. However, the following outline provides a common framework for presenting evaluation results.
- Description of the program, including its goals, target population, and activities.
- Overview of the evaluation questions.
- Description of the evaluation participants (such as sample size and strategies used to obtain consent).
- Explanation of the methods and the procedures used to collect and analyze data.

Report, continued

- Outline of the strengths and limitations of the evaluation methodology
- Presentation of evaluation findings, including:
  - Characteristics of the participants, such as their demographic background or other relevant information.
  - Services provided by the program, including the amounts and types of services provided.
  - Results for each major evaluation question.

- Conclusions and recommendations
  - Strengths of the program as revealed by the evaluation findings.
  - Recommendations for improving the services that are provided.
  - Other implications of the findings, such as policy implications.
  - Suggestions for improving the future evaluation activities.

Report writing tips

Organize your information. Organization can be one of the main challenges in preparing an evaluation report. Your readers should be able to easily understand the structure of the report and find the information that interests them. Consider the following recommendations:

- Organize your report by evaluation issues, rather than by data collection strategy. List each of your key evaluation questions and then answer them with the available information.
- Provide an introduction that summarizes the format and content of the report.
- Use headings/subheadings consistently to help readers follow your organization.

Make it easy to identify key findings. If you have a lot of information to report, it can be easy for readers to lose track of your main findings and conclusions. Make your key findings stand out, so that your stake-holders can easily find them and determine their significance and usefulness. Consider the following suggestions:

- Within each section, start with the most important information.
- Present key findings both in text and in tables.

- Consider using a bold font or section subheading to present key statements of findings.
- Restate your key findings, in your executive summary and/or in your conclusions.

Consider using an executive summary.
For long reports, an executive summary can be helpful. Having a shorter and simpler presentation ensures that information is easily accessible to a wide range of audiences. Readers who want additional detail should be able to find it in the full report. Once a summary has been prepared, it can be an introduction to the full report, or distributed as a stand-alone document. When creating a summary, make sure that the content accurately reflects the information presented in the full report.

Put supplemental information in an appendix.
To keep the main report brief and focused, consider putting some information in the appendix. Significant findings and discussions should not be located in the appendix. Instead, the appendix can provide supplemental information to interested stakeholders, such as:

- Additional information about the program, such as a copy of the logic model.
- Copies of focus group protocols, surveys, or other materials.
- Copies of consent forms.
- Additional tables or figures.

Use simple, but interesting, formatting.
Formatting can help make reports easy to read and understand. Keeping the report visually interesting, but not too "busy" can help keep readers engaged in the report. Consider the following tips:

- Leave "white space" – do not crowd the page.
- Avoid using more than 2-3 fonts within one document.
- Use an 11-12 point font size – make sure that it is legible and easy to read.
- Use features such as bold, italic, and underline sparingly and consistently throughout the report.
- Use bullets or sidebars to emphasize key information.

Use understandable tables and graphs to highlight key findings. Tables and graphs can be a valuable supplement to your written text. When presenting your key findings, consider whether the information will be best communicated using a table, chart, or written text. If you use tables or graphs, keep them as clear and simple as possible.

Use straightforward and interesting language.
The language used in the report not only sets the tone for the report, but also determines how understandable the report will be to your readers. Consider the following tips:

- se familiar words rather than jargon.
- Use active verbs as much as possible.
- Delete unnecessary words and phrases.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Avoid expressions that may not be familiar across cultural communities.

Be objective. It is crucial that you report findings objectively, including positive and negative results. Use disappointing results to guide recommendations for enhancing services or addressing implementation barriers, rather than dismissing them. Every evaluation has limitations in terms of how information was collected. Discuss these limitations fully and honestly. Be clear about what is a statistical finding versus your interpretation. Do not use emotionally charged language when describing your program or findings.

Invite stakeholders to review and discuss the results

It is important to review results with staff and colleagues before finalizing a report. Discussing a draft version of the report can provide you with additional viewpoints regarding the meaning of the data. For example, your colleagues can help interpret any puzzling or surprising findings. Their interpretations or opinions may help you determine how to frame your conclusions and recommendations in the final report.

There may also be political considerations. It may be helpful to brief important stakeholders before releasing a report publicly. This briefing gives agency officials or policymakers time to digest the findings and consider the implications. It may also provide them with an opportunity to prepare a response if desired.

Consider creative strategies for disseminating results

Be creative and innovative in reporting findings. Use a variety of techniques such as visual displays, oral presentations, interim reports, and informal conversations. Additional ideas include:

- Making a short video presenting the results.
- Sharing results with the media, through a press release and/or press conference.

- Making presentations to select groups, such as community partners or potential funders.
- Writing separate summaries and articles targeted at specific audiences or stakeholder groups.
- Staging a debate, in which opposing points of view can be fully aired.

Quick links to more information

Bureau of Justice Assistance—Reporting and Using Evaluation Results

http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation/guide/ru2.htm

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Tool Kit: Reporting

http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=90&CID=281&ItemID=2810021&NID=2820021&LanguageID=0

In future tip sheets

- Using evaluation for program improvement (7/08)
- Using evaluation for policy development and advocacy (10/08)

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm or www.wilderresearch.org.